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ABSTRACT

Noting that television network coverage of hostage crises tends to emphasize the same topics while depicting them in similar ways, and that networks may be unwittingly granting legitimacy to terrorist grievances, a study investigated the nature of "NBC Nightly News" coverage of the Trans World Airline (TWA) hostage crisis. Specific questions addressed by the study dealt with the percentage of news time devoted to the crisis, the topics emphasized, types of stories and formats used, and types of sources interviewed. A content analysis of videotapes of "NBC Nightly News" broadcasts indicated that extensive coverage was devoted to the 17-day ordeal. Approximately 67% of news times and 61% of news stories were devoted to the crisis. Most stories were reporter stories, rather than anchor stories, and approximately 63% of all stories contained interviews, most frequently with average citizens and public officials. Stories relating to the status, location, and health of the hostages represented the dominant topic of coverage, while topics relating to the hostages' families and official United States reaction to the crisis also characterized coverage. The findings suggest that NBC coverage was dramatic and reactive, as well as extensive, although limited attention was devoted to historical, cultural, and other factors which may have given rise to the TWA hijacking. (HTH)

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TERRORISM ON THE EVENING NEWS: AN ANALYSIS OF COVERAGE OF THE TWA HOSTAGE CRISIS ON "NBC NIGHTLY NEWS"

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TERRORISM ON THE EVENING NEWS: AN ANALYSIS OF COVERAGE OF THE TWA HOSTAGE CRISIS ON "NBC NIGHTLY NEWS"

ABSTRACT

Earlier studies on network coverage of terrorism have shown that the networks devote extensive coverage to hostage crises. Further, the networks tend to emphasize the same topics while depicting them in similar ways. These trends have contributed to growing concerns that the networks may be granting legitimacy to terrorist grievances while they willingly or unwillingly become participants in the news event.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the nature of news coverage devoted to the TWA hostage crisis of "NBC Nightly News." A central objective was to investigate the emphasis which the broadcast devoted to the crisis throughout the 17-day ordeal. Specific research questions addressed by the study included (1) What percentage of news time did "NBC Nightly News" devote to the crisis? (2) What topics did the news broadcast emphasize in its crisis coverage? (3) What types of stories and formats did hostage reports frequently involve? and (4) What types of sources were interviewed in hostage reports?

Videotapes of hostage reports broadcast on "NBC Nightly News" were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. A content analysis of the broadcasts indicated that extensive coverage was devoted the crisis over 17 days. Approximately 67 percent of news time and 61 percent of news stories were devoted to the TWA crisis. Topics relating to the hostages, their families and official U.S. reaction to the crisis characterized crisis coverage on the television network's evening newscast.

Introduction

A series of international terrorist activities during the latter months of 1985 again focused attention on the role of the media in publicizing such incidents. The commercial television networks devoted extensive coverage to the TWA hostage crisis, the Achille Lauro hijacking, the Malta debacle and the Rome/Vienna Airport bombings. By providing detailed news coverage of a terrorist event throughout the day the television networks risk giving a platform to terrorist grievances. Laquer has asserted that the success of a terrorist operation depends heavily on the amount of publicity it receives.[1]

How much media attention is excessive? Do early morning and late night broadcasts devoted to following up on crisis events qualify as excessive? The nightly news broadcasts of the three networks may contribute to the notion of "excessive coverage" of terrorist events by the extent to which reports on terrorism dominate the evening news. Alexander has observed that through excessive news coverage "establishment" communications channels willingly or unwillingly become tools in the terrorist strategy.[2]

Adams has noted that the accusation that excessive media coverage legitimizes terrorist interests warrants documentation before we can accept such a charge as factual.[3] It may also be helpful to systematically examine network news coverage of terrorist events to gain a

a more adequate perspective on what constitutes "excessive coverage."

The daily network news broadcast provides a major outlet upon which many Americans rely for news of the day. Further, the agenda-setting potential of television warrants that social scientists begin to explore audience implications of detailed coverage of terrorism.[4] An idividual network's daily news coverage of a hostage crisis sends a message to viewers by the emphasis which the evening news affords the event. Consequently, the purpose of the study was to systematically analyze the extent of coverage which one network news broadcast devoted to a hostage crisis during the event. Several earlier studies have analyzed the three networks' evening news coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis. Such comparisons of crisis coverage among the networks has been enlightening. However, more in-depth analyses of individual network news broadcasts may provide additional insight into the nature, rationale and emphasis of network news on terrorism.

Related Studies

Altheide found no significant differences among the networks in the number of reports and topics covered relative to the Iranian hostage crisis.[5] He noted that reports on the instability and volatility of the Iranian government characterized the evening news broadcasts of all

three networks. In another study of the Iranian hostage crisis, Meeske and Javaheri again found similarity among the networks in that they were neutral in terms of expressing bias for or against the U.S. and Iran.[6]

In a later study Altheide found that certain topics received varied amounts of network coverage during the Iranian hostage crisis.[7] He observed that the reporting of selected events corresponded with criteria of production formats such as visual quality, thematic unity and accessibility. Similarity in organization and format among networks contributed to consonance or homogeneity in network reports of the hostage crisis.

Although much has been written about the similarity of how the networks covered the Iranian hostage crisis, Nimmo and Combs reported that the three networks exhibited differing thematic emphases and foci of coverage.[8] The authors also noted that the networks differed in the persons selected as news sources. NBC, for example, was found to have relied more heavily on average citizens in the network's reports on the crisis.

Paletz, Ayanian and Fozzard studied network coverage of three terrorist groups and found that the networks reported the same events and portrayed them similarly.[9] The researchers concluded that television news did not endow terrorists with legitimacy and that the justness of terrorist causes was denied. A fault of network coverage, according to the authors, was its failure to adequately

reflect upon the underlying objectives behind terrorist acts.

Research Questions

The objective of the study was to analyze the broadcasts of "NBC Nightly News" which aired during the TWA hostage crisis of June 1985.

The period examined was June 14-June 30, 1985, which encompassed the day in which the hostages were seized to the time of their eventual release. The extent of coverage devoted to reports on the hostage crisis was the central issue to be investigated. Several specific research questions which the study addressed included the following:

1. What percentage of news time did NBC Nightly News devote to the crisis?
2. What topics did the broadcast emphasize in its crisis coverage?
3. What types of stories did hostage reports frequently involve?
4. What formats did hostage reports frequently assume?
5. What types of sources were interviewed in hostage reports?

Method

A comprehensive content analysis of TWA hostage reports broadcast on NBC Nightly News was undertaken to address the above issues. Comprehensive, compiled video tapes of these reports were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. All TWA hostage stories broadcast by the evening news program between June 14 and June 30, 1985 were included in the analysis. Each story was coded with the aid of a two-page protocol for story type, story format, topic, origin of report, length of story, source type and position in newscast.

The unit of analysis was the news story which was defined as "any topic introduced by the anchorman coupled with any report or reports by other correspondents on the same topic and any concluding remarks by the anchorman.[10] Stories were coded according to type as either anchor stories, reporter stories or commentaries. One of four categories was used to code story format. These categories were similar to those used by Nimmo and Combs.[11] Consequently, stories were coded as one of the following: (1) anchor read (2) reporter package, (3) reporter voice-over or (4) live cross-talk.

Source Type

A television story may contain interviews from several different sources. To identify the types of sources interviewed in TWA hostage reports, each story source was

coded as either a public official, a technical expert, an interest group leader or an average citizen. Only those sources interviewed in a given story were coded according to source type.

Story Topic

EachTWA hostage story was coded into one of 15 topic categories which corresponded to the topic which was principally featured in the report. Several of the topic categories were developed after a preliminary review of video tapes and news transcripts. The other topic categories used in the analysis were based on Altheide's study of the Iranian hostage crisis.[12]

News Time

Each hostage story broadcast on NBC Nightly News was coded in seconds with the aid of a stop watch. In addition, a computation for the news hole of each of the 17 newscasts was computed by eliminating time devoted to commercials. This compuitation was facilitated by the use of both NBC transcripts of each broadcast and the Television News Index and Abstracts.[13] The percentage of news time devoted to TWA stories by day was computed as a ratio of TWA story time and news hole time.

Intercoder reliability estimates were obtained for story type, story format, story topic and source type. Two judges coded a subset of the TWA story data. The reliability

estimates were computed as a percentage of agreement and were as follows: story type (90%); story format (90%); story topic (90%) and source type (97.5%).

Results

NBC Nightly News devoted extensive coverage to the TWA hostage crisis. Approximately 66.8 percent of total news time over the 17-day period was consumed by reports on the hostage crisis. Further, nearly 61 percent of the stories broadcast on NBC Nightly News over the crisis period were TWA hostage stories. Hostage crisis coverage was consistently high on each news day. Table 1 provides a daily accounting of the percentage of total stories in the newscast consumed by TWA stories. This percentage ranged from 36 percent to 100 percent on the day the hostages were released.

An average of nine stories on the crisis were reported in each newscast over the study period. The average length of a TWA hostage story was approximately 90 seconds. Nearly 236 minutes or about four hours of news time was devoted to the crisis. The percentage of news time consumed by TWA stories on each day was also substantial. Table 2 lists the percentage of time devoted to TWA stories by day. The right column lists the time (in minutes) consumed by TWA stories by day over the 17-day crisis.

Topical Emphasis

Stories relating to the status, location and health of the hostages represented the dominant topic upon which NBC Nightly News focused its hostage coverage. Table 3 lists percentages of TWA stories associated with each of 15 topics. U.S. Policies, Hostage Families, Retaliation Issues and Israel Diplomacy completed a select group of topics which involved the larger percentages of TWA stories.

Table 4 lists the news time (in minutes) devoted to TWA stories by topic. The percentage of news story time associated with each topic over the crisis period is shown in the right column of the table. Again the topic"Hostages" was the most dominant category, accounting for 32% of news time devoted to the crisis.

Story Type and Format

The great majority of TWA stories broadcast on NBC Nightly News were reporter stories. This story type accounted for 68 percent of the TWA crisis reports. Table 5 shows that 29 percent of TWA stories were anchor stories and that only 2.5 percent of TWA stories were commentaries. Over the period NBC commentator John Chancellor delivered four TWA-related commentaries on the evening newscast.

The format assumed by the largest percentage of TWA stories was the reporter package. This format is one in which the anchor gives a brief introduction to the story then cuts to the reporter who delivers a segment with one

or more interviews. Table 6 lists the percentage of TWA stories associated with each of the four formats. The anchor read format was associated with the second largest percentage of TWA stories. Reporter voice-over and live cross talk formats were associated with the same percentage of TWA stories.

Source Type

Approximately 63 percent of TWA stories contained interviews. Table 7 lists the percentage of TWA reports which contained interviews from each of the four source types. "NBC Nightly News" reporters most frequently interviewed average citizens and public officials in TWA stories.

Discussion

Over a 17-day period NBC Nightly News broadcast a total of 157 stories on the TWA hostage crisis. The coverage was extensive both in terms of numbers of stories and time devoted to hostage stories. On a day by day basis, the results strongly suggest that the hostage crisis was the dominant news event covered over the study period. Data on the position of TWA stories in the 17 newscasts strongly suggest that the hostage crisis was the dominant news event covered over the study period. Data on the position of TWA stories in the 17 newscasts showed that approximately 50 percent of TWA stories were presented as one of the first

five stories within a given newscast. When topical emphasis was considered, the evening news program focused heavily on the plight of the hostages and U.S. reaction to this act of international terrorism. The dominant topics were Hostages, U.S. Policies and Hostage Families.

The findings suggested that TWA crisis coverage on "NBC Nightly News" was dramatic and reactive, as well as extensive. This trend of reporting was similar to that portrayed in the evening news broadcasts of all three networks during the Iranian hostage crisis. Limited attention was devoted to historical, cultural and other factors which may have given rise to the TWA hijacking. It appears that the news broadcast could have played a greater role as an interpretor of this international event.

The large proportion of news time devoted to the crisis on "NBC Nightly News" raises the issue of balance within an individual news program. The dominant play which the hostage crisis received might influence the issue priorities of newscast viewers. Future research should explore the extent (if any) to which newscast crisis coverage influences the issue agendas of viewers and their perceptions of reality.

Notes

[1] Walter Laqueur, Terrorism: A Study of National and International Political Violence (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

[2] Yonah Alexander, "Terrorism, the Media and the Police," Journal of International Affairs, 32:101-113 (Spring/Summer 1978).

[3] William C. Adams, Television Coverage of International Affairs (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1982).

[4] Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press (St. Paul: West, 1977).

[5] David L. Altheide, "Three-in-One News: Network Coverage of Iran," Journalism Quarterly, 59:482-486 (Autumn 1982).

[6] Milan D. Meeske and Mohamad H. Javaheri, "Network Television Coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis," Journalism Quarterly, 59:641-645 (Winter 1982).

[7] David L. Altheide, "Impact of Format and Ideology On TV News Coverage of Iran," Journalism Quarterly, 62:346-351 (Summer 1985).

[8] Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, Nightly Horrors: Crisis Coverage By Television Network News (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 165.

[9] David L. Paletz, John Z. Ayanian and Peter A. Fozzard, "Terrorism On TV News: The IRA, the FALN, and the Red Brigades," in William C. Adams, ed., Television Coverage of International Affairs (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1982), pp. 143-165.

[10] Joseph S. Fowler and Stuart W. Showalter, "Evening Network News Selection: A Confirmation of News Judgment," Journalism Quarterly, 51:712-715 (Winter 1974)

[11] Nimmo and Combs, ibid.

[12] David L Altheide, "Three-in-One News: Network Coverage of Iran," Journalism Quarterly, 59:482-486 (Autumn 1982).

[13] Vanderbilt Television News Archive, "Television News Index and Abstracts: A Guide to the Videotape Collection of the Network Evening News Programs in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive," (Nashville: Joint University Libraries, 1985).

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF TWA STORIES BROADCAST OVER STUDY PERIOD BY DAY

News Day	N	Total Stories	Percent
June 14	9	15	60
June 15	7	16	44
June 16	10	15	67
June 17	10	15	67
June 18	12	16	75
June 19	9	18	50
June 20	12	16	75
June 21	7	14	50
June 22	5	14	36
June 23	8	14	57
June 24	12	16	75
June 25	9	17	53
June 26	11	19	58
June 27	9	15	60
June 28	8	17	47
June 29	10	13	77
June 30	9	9	100
	157	259	

TABLE 2

PERCENT OF NEWSCAST TIME DEVOTED TO TWA CRISIS BY DAY

News Day	Percent News Time By Day	News Time (Minutes)
June 14	58.4	12.5
June 15	54.5	11.3
June 16	73.2	15.7
June 17	74.8	15.7
June 18	76.5	16.6
June 19	60.8	12.9
June 20	85.4	17.8
June 21	48.4	10.5
June 22	42	6
June 23	70.6	15.2
June 24	65.2	14.1
June 25	63.2	13.1
June 26	63.5	13.3
June 27	65.3	13.9
June 28	53.3	11.5
June 29	76.2	16.3
June 30	97.8	19.6
		236

TABLE 3

TWA Story Distibution By Topic

Topic	Percent
Hostages	31.8 (50)
U.S. Policies	21.7 (34)
Hostage Families	8.9 (14)
Retaliation Issues	7.6 (12)
Israel Diplomacy	7 (11)
U.S./Israel Diplomacy	4.5 (7)
Religion-Islam/Culture	3.8 (6)
Airport Security	5.1 (8)
Syria Mediation	1.9 (3)
Lebanon Internal Problems	1.9 (3)
World Reaction	1.9 (3)
Shiite Demands	.6 (1)
Lebanon Revolution	.6 (1)
Lebanon: Gov./Politics	1.3 (2)
U.S. Private Diplomacy	1.3 (2)
	157

TABLE 4

Time Devoted to TWA Stories By Topic (In Minutes)

Topic	News Time	Percent
Hostages	74.8	32.0
U.S. Policies	55.1	23.4
Hostage Families	24.8	10.5
Retaliation Issues	16.1	6.8
Israel Diplomacy	12.8	5.4
U.S./Israel Diplomacy	10.7	4.5
Religion-Islam/Culture	10.4	4.4
Airport Security	9	3.8
Syria Mediation	4.9	2.1
Lebanon Internal Problems	4.3	1.8
World Reaction	4.2	1.8
Shiite Demands	3	1.3
Lebanon Revolution	2.6	1.1
Lebanon: Gov./Politics	2.2	.9
U.S. Private Diplomacy	.9	.4

TABLE 5

TWA Crisis Reports By Story Type

Type	N	%
Reporter	107	68.2
Anchor	46	29.3
Commentary	4	2.5
	157	

TABLE 6

TWA Crisis Reports By Story Format

Format	N	%
Reporter Package	77	49
Anchor Read	50	31
Reporter V.O.	15	9.6
Live Cross-Talk	15	9.6
	157	

TABLE 7

TWA Crisis Reports By Source Type

Source Type	N	%
Average Citizen	44	28.0
Public Official	38	24.2
Interest Group Leader	9	5.7
Technical Expert	8	5.1
	99	63%